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Velveteen Illusions and Daily Mini "1919s": Constructing Societies that 'Belong to All'

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Lecture at the Illinois Humanities Elective Studies

Supper Club

Chicago

Wednesday, January 6, 2016

By

Prexy Nesbitt

- I wish to thank Jane Beachy and the Illinois Humanities Council for inviting me to lecture this evening.

-Open with viewing clip of Senator Robert Kennedy speaking in Cape Town, South Africa in 1966

I drafted two titles for this lecture this evening. One you have seen: "Race, Class & Gender: The Boiling Cauldron of 'Policing' in Chicago." That is the promotional title. The Working title is:

Velveteen Illusions and Daily Mini "1919's": Constructing Societies that 'Belong to All.'

Just as the 1966 Robert Kennedy speech in South Africa opened with a bit of skullduggery, let me stimulate us a bit with the following quotation, asking you to identify it:

WE THE PEOPLE OF _____
HONOR THOSE WHO SUFFERED FOR JUSTICE AND FREEDOM
IN OUR LAND;
RESPECT THOSE WHO HAVE WORKED TO BUILD AND
DEVELOP
OUR COUNTRY; AND
BELIEVE THAT _____ BELONGS TO ALL
WHO LIVE IN IT,
UNITED IN OUR DIVERSITY...

The “Velveteen” in my second title comes from a children’s story, The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams, 1922. I am certain that you all know it. Like St. Exupery’s Le Petit Prince, 1943, it is a story about love, and embracing the different; about inclusion and diversity.

In 1935 Richard Wright wrote a poem entitled, “Between the World and Me,” part of which reads:

...
**There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly
upon a cushion of ashes.**
**There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt
finger accusingly at the sky.**
**There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and
a scorched coil of greasy hemp;**
**A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat,
and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.**
**And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,
butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a
drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;**
**Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the
lingering smell of gasoline...**
...
**And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth
into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.**
**My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my
black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
they bound me to the sapling.**
**And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from
me in limp patches.**
**And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into
my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.**
**Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a
baptism of gasoline.**

**And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like
water, boiling my limbs
Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot
sides of death.
Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in
yellow surprise at the sun....**

Wright's poem is a response to at least three major historical events that fit my categorization of "mini racial riots: "

The 1919 Chicago Race Riot
most severe of 25 race riots
that summer with 38 dead
538 injured and 1000+ black
families made homeless
The Tulsa Oklahoma Race Riot of 1921
55-300 dead
10,000 blacks homeless
6,000 arrested
The Rosewood Florida Riot of January 1923
80 + people dead

The Wright poem " *Between the World and Me* "was also a response to the recorded 3,959 black people lynched in a dozen Southern States between 1877 and 1950 (Berman, The Washington Post, Feb 10, 2015)

What were Chicago, Tulsa and Rosewood about ? What was behind these profound tragedies and underlying the ongoing tragedy of lynching before and after 1877 and 1950? They entailed organized racist attacks by white groupings upon blacks. But they also involved, especially in Chicago, groups of

black people systematically adopting armed self-defense measures, including the use of guns, in response to the attacks.

These Twentieth Century racial confrontations in these and other cities followed somewhat similar patterns. They often began with a relatively small scale incident. (In Charleston, South Carolina, the initial precipitant was a black man who failed to step aside for two white sailors walking his way.) These small incidents were loaded with the racial and class tensions and antagonisms of the period. And always underlying these small incidents was a major, omnipresent but often unarticulated mandate :

The articulation and protection of the structure and practice of **white supremacy** or what the architects of South Africa's apartheid racism called **baasskap**, ("boss-ship" or blatant white domination over blacks).

For years in the United States the mob or the Klan with their nooses and fires controlled black populations (and others like Chinese railway workers in the West) in the post slavery South and other parts of the USA. Historian George Frederickson notes in his classic study, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History that historically, the control came from mobs and the Klan in the US South and from the army and/or police in South Africa.

A 2009 book by a California sociologist, Ivan Evans, (Cultures of Violence) differentiates private and communal lynchings. In doing this, the author underscores how much lynching was about control. After noting that the private lynching (done by one to four men, often state officials) was done rather furtively, the author goes on to point out:

The same cannot be said of communal lynching (with crowds of up to 25,000 and a picnic or county fair ambience, my comment) which was dominated from beginning to end by symbolic functions that loomed larger and reverberated longer than the actual death of the victim. More often than not, the lynch victim would be disfigured before, during and after his death, and the remains of the body were often carved up and sold as mementos. Together with its highly public nature, the extensive use of ritual torture in communal lynching commands attention. Whereas private lynching's symbolized the prowess that individual white men enjoyed over all African Americans, communal lynching in the New South symbolized the collective domination of one racial group over another(p.7)

Today, what we are seeing in the police killings and attacks upon black people is much more than one aberrant policeman or a single rotten apple in an otherwise fine crate of Granny Smith apples. What we are seeing in the exploding sagas here in Chicago and elsewhere (but especially here) is the spectre of a system of hiring armed centurions to protect KAPITAL AND PROPERTY gone amuck!

"Serve and protect-what a fuckin' joke! We are the hired goons guardin' the gold and white madams' cherries; keepin' them out of the hands and pants of the black hordes In the valleys," was the way one of Chicago's Afro-American Patrolmen's League (AAPL)members once explained Twentieth Century Chicago police work to me.

It is important that we probe what is happening today very deeply. For starters, let me suggest that there is a relationship between the escalating annual number of police killings of unarmed civilians (1,134 in 2015 – the United Kingdom's Guardian newspaper) and the growing number of guns possessed by US citizens(the Congressional Research Service stated there were 310 million guns in US citizens hands in 2009. Some feel there will be nearly 400 million by the end of the current decade).

Let me further suggest that there is a relationship between the national police killings rate and the fact that with a 31% rate of weapons exported worldwide, the United States produces and sells more weapons than any other nation in the world. There is a relationship, as well, between the police killings and the number of armed interventions done by US forces (57 attempts, 36 successful, since just 1949 in places varying from Diego Garcia Islands to Libya, according to William Blum, author of America's Deadliest Export)

Lastly, when it comes to examining the values system, the normative framework underlying the historic and deep seated police vendetta against poor and working class black communities (whether shootings, detentions, stop and frisk actions or inordinate numbers of pull-overs for alleged traffic violations) ask yourself how US police behavior towards poor Black, Latino and Native American citizens might correlate with US governmental conduct towards the world's nations, especially those poorer peoples living in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Ask which of the world's major nations have not signed unto the OPTIONAL PROTOCOL TO THE CONVENTION AGAINST TORTURE (OPCAT), adopted by the UN General Assembly in

2002: (which international measure aims to prevent torture by establishing a system of regular visitations to detention places by independent national and international bodies); ask which nations have not joined the International Criminal Court of Justice (ICCJ); or signed unto the treaties banning land mines, cluster bombs, racial discrimination, discrimination against women, or weapons in space; or those establishing rights for migrant workers, regulating the arms trade, providing protection from disappearances, defending the rights of people with disabilities; ask what country is not yet a signatory to the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights? The one country that covers all those categories is the United States. It is the 'one size that fits all.' So, let me suggest that a case could be made that US police behavior goes hand-in-glove with the US government's foreign policy orientations.

Thus, the 200 known cases of using torture to interrogate black Chicagoans carried out by Chicago Police Commander John Burge during the period 1972-1991, the Reid Interrogation Technique and the continued practice of solitary confinement all become pretty standard fare as part of the US polity's methods of law enforcement. And these practices, challenged by most world judicatory and religious bodies, become further sanctioned in the USA when one learns that during at least the Bush Presidency, professional bodies like the American Psychological Association secretly helped facilitate the CIA Torture Program by servicing that program with any requisite legal and ethical justifications. (see April 2015 report, All the President's Psychologists).

An experienced and perceptive friend, Professor John Higginson, Professor History at the University of

Massachusetts, Amhearst (originally from Chicago) has recently written a profound and penetrating study of violence in the founding of South Africa and the United States. Entitled, Collective Violence and the Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900-1948, (Cambridge, 2015), early in the book, Professor Higginson cites a study that raises what I think is a definitive question. It is a question that in my life experience, would have been posed by the strategic thinkers and leaders in Africa. It is a question that was posed repeatedly by the Cabrals, Mandelas and Machels determining WHO WAS THEIR ENEMY? And what strategies should they employ. It is a question that should be applied to the sub-stratum of US police and their killing/brutalization approaches to law enforcement. Citing the work of a Timothy Snyder on Hitler and Stalin, Professor Higginson notes:

Significance is not the same thing as causation. If we want to understand causation, the victims have something to tell us, but the perpetrators have more to tell us...We must in some sense free ourselves from all the powerful limitations that identifying with victims imposes upon us if we wish to see the causes in all their complexity and human behavior in all of its dark uneven richness... That means, at a minimum, seeing and understanding the humanity of everyone concerned, not just the victims. (Higginson,p.13)

So, we must, I suggest, as part of totally dismantling the police killing system that has been operating in Chicago and the Chicago region for years, begin to look more critically at the "perps," at their police sub-culture and its institutions like FOP(the Fraternal Order of Police), at their neighborhoods that

create, nurture and sustain police culture, police families, police values and police codes in police-filled communities like Beverly, Morgan Park, Sauganash, Canaryville and Bridgeport.

I suspect that one of the most salient things we will find is that the Chicago sites of police culture are also the sites of trauma, fear and insecurity as expressed in racial loathing but also in alcoholism and domestic abuse.

Seven years ago I wrote that

It is critical that residential segregation in Chicago be fully understood. Chicago's residential patterns are not just grounded in whites and blacks choosing to live separately, as some have recently suggested with great fanfare.⁵ Residential segregation in Chicago is a foundation stone for a system of race—and class-based inequalities that have governed “the windy city” since before the reign of Mayor Richard J. Daley (father to the current Mayor, Richard M. Daley) began in 1955. Chicago is about inequalities. It is about neighborhoods with shiny new, glass condominiums, banks, doctors' offices, good schools, good restaurants, bookstores, bike paths, flower-lined boulevards and regular garbage pickups. These are in the neighborhoods on the Lake, in the surrounding suburbs (especially to the north), and in a few pockets within the city (e.g., “Bucktown” or “University Village”). These are the neighborhoods of gentrification, privilege, and whiteness with a sprinkling of “flavah.” Then, just as in South African apartheid's colonial architecture, Chicago has its neighborhoods, its “township”: “K-town” in Lawndale and “La Villita” (Little Village) on Chicago's West Side, Englewood and Roseland on Chicago's South Side. These are the neighborhoods that the city's prestigious universities' staffs tell their students not to frequent except for their Wackenhut-secured annual Martin Luther King Day celebration tours.

Then and today, the blocks where lots of the police live (by law they are supposed to live within the city of Chicago) contain *gendarme* residences. They are not wealthy homes but tiny stuccos and modest walk-ups, many old; made for people who have little home time and no servants, people who are always out guarding(for passable salaries but lots of overtime) the palaces, stores, mansions and townhouses of the rich and famous- the seriously wealthy, whether on the Gold Coast or in Kenilworth with its gates, ravines and private beaches. It is in these neighborhoods with their parishes and Chicago public schools and bowling alleys and bars, that they have been taught about THEM- the ones breeding like rats and rabbits in the feared neighborhoods where they go to wage the endless

war. In key respects Chicago's police are, like so many Americans, one paycheck away from being the 'niggahs' (Chicago police often say 'jungle bunnies') they fear and have been taught to despise.

Institutionally reconstructing the Chicago Police Department (and other police departments nation-wide) with their 'kill' hankerings is inextricably part of a much larger challenge. It is the challenge of the triple threats of poverty, racism and militarism, highlighted repeatedly in the speeches and writings of Dr. Martin Luther King. The point is that waging the struggle against police violence is *ipso facto* contending against a corporatized US military--prison-policing complex that has become a genie out-of-the-box, one motored by some deep well waters of white supremacy and racism.

What good is using a body camera, if the bodies to be monitored are viewed as valueless "superfluous appendages," as the South African apartheid regime used to label 'the "natives," ' especially the women and children.

None of us in this room can afford to sit this struggle out. Duplicitous mayoral initiatives, emotional *mea culpa* dramatics, new independent ombudspersons, investigatory bodies, none of these feints are going to definitively address the longevity, pervasiveness and insidiousness of racialized and supremacist US institutional practices like the policing and prison systems.

The late eminent, sage and wholly professional American historian, John Hope Franklin, who died in 2009 observed in the last months of his life that, while jubilant about the selection of Barack Obama, electing a black president would never be sufficient. He said that the fundamental requirement,

What we

need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is. It is a past that is filled with some of the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality and degradation in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is and not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good-faith effort to turn our history around.

(quoted in the New York Review of Books, December 17, 2015)

My friends, the challenges we face in this country (and world) today necessitate long distance runners, multi-lingual, conversant and engaged on various fronts. They are a breed of artisan who enlist for the duration, fully conscious of how high the stakes are and ready to weather the ups and downs, the joys and the pains of the ride. You who are like that remind me of the famous Paul Robeson's comment during the 1930's Spanish Civil War and its contestation against the forces of fascism:

"The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of the capitalist era is characterized by the degradation of my people: despoiled of their lands, their true culture destroyed...denied equal protection of the law, and deprived their rightful place in the respect of their fellows."

One of your colleagues, conscious of the pop culture map of today and the fact that so much being done today is supporting hierarchy and oppression , noted “ the question then becomes more personal. Rather than asking what sort of artist fights for slavery, we artists must ask ourselves “ ***what am I fighting for?***”

Her question resonates like a deep string bass and is there for all of us.